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S. Utah may get \$66 million more

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ST. GEORGE - First, it was \$6 million, then \$3.2 million more. Now, Southern Utah could receive at least \$66 million through the federal Emergency Watershed Protection Program to restore area waterways and protect against future floods.

The Senate Appropriations Committee on Wednesday approved a recommendation from Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, to supply Utah with \$66 million in EWP funds through this year's Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Bill. It still must pass the entire Senate and go to conference between the Senate and the House before the bill goes to the president.

But Bennett said in an interview Wednesday that he does not anticipate any delays because the request is part of bill to help fund troops in Iraq.

"It passed in the bill without objection," Bennett said. "I would hope it will get to the president within 30 days."

The bill contained a total of \$103 million for the EWP Program, and Bennett said at least \$66 million must be spent in Utah. The balance likely will go to flood-damaged areas in California and Nevada.

EWP funds are administered through the Natural Resources Conservation Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Bennett said the amount was the maximum available through the agency's interpretation of the law.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., also recently wrote a joint letter to Sen. Thad Cochran, R-Miss., chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, explaining the flood damage and asking that he support the request for EWP funds for their respective states.

"I made it clear to the chairman that this was my highest priority this year," Hatch said in a statement released Wednesday.

The bill also includes a provision to insure that local financial and technical resources contributed near the time of the flooding will count toward the 25 percent match required of local entities.

"Instead of having to come up with cash, they can count the services and in-kind materials they've already put in," Bennett said.

If approved by Congress and signed by the president, the bill will add at least \$66 million to the \$9.2 million already provided through the conservation service. The original \$6 million is funding various projects along the Santa Clara River, including the debris removal and bank-armoring projects in Green Valley and Santa Clara.

Blake Walbeck, area resource conservationist for the conservation service in St. George, said most of the \$3.2 million, which was announced March 22, likely will go to projects in Enterprise, including sediment removal and streambed stabilization.

Right now, however, Walbeck said the conservation service is concentrating on the Santa Clara River project. He said it is about 80 percent complete.

"We anticipate that they'll be done on time," he said.

Washington County Commission Chairman James Eardley said the EWP-funded work is based on a priority list established by conservation service engineers. Work on Shoal Creek, Spring Creek and Cottonwood Creek in the Enterprise area is among the priorities.

But about \$300,000 will help fund the debris removal up to Gunlock, he said. Eardley said he hopes Gunlock is not in as much danger as it was during the January flooding because most of the snowpack is gone in the area that created that flood.

When the additional funding is received, it likely will go to work on the Virgin River, Eardley said.

"The Virgin has a lot more potential for flooding," he said. "We're extremely concerned about the water content in the snowpack in the high country."

Eardley said the commission plans to declare an emergency Monday in anticipation of high spring runoff. He said the county is not forecasting disaster, but just getting prepared and trying to retain the attention of federal agencies.

"We're hoping for the best and planning for the worst," he said.

Ron Whitehead, public works director for the county, said county officials will review a list of concerns from local communities at Monday's meeting. He said the rivers will see a lot of water during the spring runoff from April to July.

Current predictions show 210,000 acre feet of water - or 328 percent of average - passing through the Virgin River at the town of Virgin during the four-month period. At Hurricane, it could be 225,000 acre feet, or 326 percent of average.

On the Santa Clara River, about 20,000 acre feet of water - or 364 percent of average - is expected to pass through the river at Pine Valley. Whitehead said that is about twice the capacity of Gunlock Reservoir.

Also, in a March 25 letter to Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr., Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns issued a secretarial primary disaster designation to Iron and Washington counties, with Beaver, Garfield and Kane counties as contiguous disaster counties.

"This designation makes farm operators in both primary and contiguous counties eligible to be considered for low-interest emergency loans from the Farm Service Agency, provided eligibility requirements are met," Johanns wrote.